ARIANNE
George R.R. Martin

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Annotation

"You want to know what the Sand Snakes, Prince Doran, Areo Hotah, Ellaria Sand, Darkstar, and the rest will be up to in WINDS OF WINTER? Quite a lot, actually. The sample will give you a taste. For the rest, you will need to wait".

- George R.R. Martin
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George R.R. Martin
ARIANNE

Excerpt from THE WINDS OF WINTER

Artwork by Magali Villeneuve (http://magali-villeneuve.blogspot.com/)

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All along the south coast of Cape Wrath rose crumbling stone watchtowers, raised in ancient days to give warning of Dornish raiders stealing in across the sea. Villages had grown up about the towers. A few had flowered into towns.

The *Peregrine* made port at the Weeping Town, where the corpse of the Young Dragon had once lingered for three days on its journey home from Dorne. The banners flapping from the town's stout wooden walls still displayed King Tommen's stag-and-lion, suggesting that here at least the writ of the Iron Throne might still hold sway. "Guard your tongues," Arianne warned her company as they disembarked. "It would be best if King's Landing never knew we'd passed this way." Should Lord Connington's rebellion be put down, it would go ill for them if it was known that Dorne had sent her to treat with him and his pretender. That was another lesson that her father had taken pains to teach her; choose your side with care, and only if they have the chance to win.

They had no trouble buying horses, though the cost was five times what it would have been last year. "They're old, but sound," claimed the hostler. "you'll not find better this side of Storm's End. The griffin's men seize every horse and mule they come upon. Oxen too. Some will make a mark upon a paper if you ask for payment, but there's others who would just as soon cut your belly open and pay you with a handful of your own guts. If you come on any such, mind your tongues and give the horses up."

The town was large enough to support three inns, and all their common rooms were rife with rumors. Arianne sent her men into each of them, to hear what they might hear. In the Broken Shield, Daemon Sand was told that the great septry on the Holf of Men had been burned and looted by raiders from the sea, and a hundred young novices from the motherhouse on Maiden Isle carried off into slavery. In the Loon, Joss Hood learned that half a hundred men and boys from the Weeping Town had set off north to join Jon Connington at Griffin's Roost, including young Ser Addam, old Lord Whitehead's son and heir. But in the aptly named Drunken Dornishman, Feathers heard men muttering that the griffin had put Red Ronnet's brother to death and raped his maiden sister. Ronnet himself was said to be rushing south to avenge his brother's death and his sister's dishonor.

That night Arianne dispatched the first of her ravens back to Dorne, reporting to her father on all they'd seen and heard. The next morning her company set out for Mistwood, as the first rays of the rising sun were slanting through the peaked roofs and crooked alleys of the Weeping Town. By midmorning a light rain began to fall, as

they were making their way north through a land of green fields and little villages. As yet, they had seen no signs of fighting, but all the other travelers along the rutted road seemed to be going in the other direction, and the women in the villages they passed gazed at them with wary eyes and kept their children close. Further north, the fields gave way to rolling hills and thick groves of old forest, the road dwindled to a track, and villages became less common.

Dusk found them on the fringes of the rainwood, a wet green world where brooks and rivers ran through dark forests and the ground was made of mud and rotting leaves. Huge willows grew along the watercourses, larger than any that Arianne had ever seen, their great trunks as gnarled and twisted as an old man's face and festooned with beards of silvery moss. Trees pressed close on every side, shutting out the sun; hemlock and red cedars, white oaks, soldier pines that stood as tall and straight as towers, colossal sentinels, big-leaf maples, redwoods, wormtrees, even here and there a wild weirwood. Underneath their tangled branches ferns and flowers grew in profusion; sword ferns, lady ferns, bellflowers and piper's lace, evening stars and poison kisses, liverwort, lungwort, hornwort. Mushrooms sprouted down amongst the tree roots, and from their trunks as well, pale spotted hands that caught the rain. Other trees were furred with moss, green or grey or red-tailed, and once a vivid purple. Lichens covered every rock and stone. Toadstools festered besides rotting logs. The very air seemed green.

Arianne had once heard her father and Maester Caleotte arguing with a septon about why the north and south sides of the Sea of Dorne were so different. The septon thought it was because of Durran Godsgrief, the first Storm King, who had stolen the daughter of the sea god and the goddess of the wind and earned their eternal emnity. Prince Doran and the maester inclined more toward wind and water, and spoke of how the big storms that formed down in the Summer Sea would pick up moisture moving north until they slammed into Cape Wrath. For some strange reason the storms never seemed to strike at Dorne, she recalled her father saying. "I know your reason," the septon had responded. "No Dornishmen ever stole away the daughter of two gods."

The going was much slower here than it had been in Dorne. Instead of proper roads, they rode down crookback slashes that snaked this way and that, through clefts in huge moss-covered rocks and down deep ravines choked with blackberry brambles. Sometimes the track petered out entirely, sinking into bogs or vanishing amongst the ferns, leaving Arianne and her companions to find their own way amongst the silent trees. The rain still fell, soft and steady. The sound of moisture dripping off the leaves was all around them, and every

mile or so the music of another little waterfall would call to them.

The wood was full of caves as well. That first night they took shelter in one of them, to get out of the wet. In Dorne they had often travelled after dark, when the moonlight turned the blowing sands to silver, but the rainwood was too full of bogs, ravines, and sinkholes, and black as pitch beneath the trees, where the moon was just a memory.

Feathers made a fire and cooked a brace of hares that Ser Garibald had taken with some wild onions and mushrooms he had found along the road. After they ate, Elia Sand turned a stick and some dry moss into a torch, and went off exploring deeper in the cave. "See that you do not go too far," Arianne told her. "Some of these caves go very deep, it is easy to get lost."

The princess lost another game of *cyvasse* to Daemon Sand, won one from Joss Hood, then retired as the two of them began to teach Jayne Ladybright the rules. She was tired of such games.

Nyrn and Tyene may have reached King's Landing by now, she mused, as she settled down crosslegged by the mouth of the cave to watch the falling rain. *If not they ought to be there soon.* Three hundred seasoned spears had gone with them, over the Boneway, past the ruins of Summerhall, and up the kingsroad. If the Lannisters had tried to spring their little trap in the kingswood, Lady Nym would have seen that it ended in disaster. Nor would the murderers have found their prey. Prince Trystane had remained safely back at Sunspear, after a tearful parting from Princess Myrcella. *That accounts for one brother*, thought Arianne*, but where is Quentyn, if not with the griffin?* Had he wed his dragon queen? King Quentyn. It still sounded silly. This new Daenerys Targaryen was younger than Arianne by half a dozen years. What would a maid that age want with her dull, bookish brother? Young girls dreamed of dashing knights with wicked smiles, not solemn boys who always did their duty. *She will want Dorne, though. If she hopes to sit the Iron Throne, she must have Sunspear.* If Quentyn was the price for that, this dragon queen would pay it. What if she was at Griffin's End with Connington, and all this about another Targaryen was just some sort of subtle ruse? Her brother could well be with her.King Quentyn. *Will I need to kneel to him?*

No good would come of wondering about it. Quentyn would be king or he would not. *I pray Daenerys treats him him more gently than she did her own brother.*

It was time to sleep. They had long leagues to ride upon the morrow. It was only as she settled down that Arianne realized Elia Sand had not returned from her explorations. *Her sisters will kill me seven different ways if anything has happened to her.* Jayne Ladybright swore that the girl had never left the cave, which meant

that she was still back there somewhere, wandering through the dark. When their shouts did not bring her forth, there was nothing to do but make torches and go in search of her.

The cave proved much deeper than any of them had suspected. Beyond the stony mouth where her company had made their camp and hobbled their horses, a series of twisty passageways led down and down, with black holes snaking off to either side. Further in, the walls opened up again, and the searchers found themselves in a vast limestone cavern, larger than the great hall of a castle. Their shouts disturbed a nest of bats, who flapped about them noisily, but only distant echoes shouted back. A slow circuit of the hall revealed three further passages, one so small that it would have required them to proceed on hands and knees. "We will try the others first," the princess said. "Daemon, come with me. Garibald, Joss, you try the other one."

The passageway Arianne had chosen for herself turned steep and wet within a hundred feet. The footing grew uncertain. Once she slipped, and had to catch herself to keep from sliding. More than once she considered turning back, but she could see Ser Daemon's torch ahead and hear him calling for Elia, so she pressed on. And all at once she found herself in another cavern, five times as big as the last one, surrounded by a forest of stone columns. Daemon Sand moved to her side and raised his torch. "Look how the stone's been shaped," he said. "Those columns, and the wall there. See them?"

"Faces," said Arianne. *So many sad eyes, staring.*

"This place belonged to the children of the forest."

"A thousand years ago." Arianne turned her head. "Listen. Is that Joss?"

It was. The other searchers had found Elia, as she and Daemon learned after they made their way back up the slippery slope to the last hall. Their passageway led down to a still black pool, where they discovered the girl up to her waist in water, catching blind white fish with her bare hands, her torch burning red and smoky in the sand where she had planted it.

"You could have died," Arianne told her, when she'd heard the tale. She grabbed Elia by the arm and shook her. "If that torch had gone out you would have been alone in the dark, as good as blind. What did you think that you were doing?"

"I caught two fish," said Elia Sand.

"*You could have died*," said Arianne again. Her words echoed off the cavern walls. *"…died… died … died…"*

Later, when they had made their back to the surface and her anger had cooled, the princess took the girl aside and sat her down. "Elia, this must end," she told her. "We are not in Dorne now. You are

not with your sisters, and this is not a game. I want your word that you will play the maidservant until we are safely back at Sunspear. I want you meek and mild and obedient. You need to hold your tongue. I'll hear no more talk of Lady Lance or jousting, no mention of your father or your sisters. The men that I must treat with are sellswords. Today they serve this man who calls himself Jon Connington, but come the morrow they could just as easily serve the Lannisters. All it takes to win a sellsword's heart is gold, and casterly Rock does not lack for that. If the wrong man should learn who you are, you could be seized and held for ransom—"

"No," Elia broke in. "*You're* the one they'll want to ransom. You're the heir to Dorne, I'm just a bastard girl. Your father would give a chest of gold for you. My father's dead."

"Dead, but not forgotten," said Arianne, who had spent half her life wishing Prince Oberyn had been her father. "You are a Sand Snake, and Prince Doran would pay any price to keep you and your sisters safe from harm." That made the child smile at least. "Do I have your sworn word? Or must I send you back?"

"I swear." Elia did not sound happy.

"On your father's bones."

"On my father's bones."

That vow she will keep, Arianne decided. She kissed her cousin on the cheek and sent her off to sleep. Perhaps some good would come of her adventure. "I never knew how wild she was till now," Arianne complained to Daemon Sand, afterward. "Why would my father inflict her on me?"

"Vengeance?" the knight suggested, with a smile.

They reached Mistwood late on the third day. Ser Daemon sent Joss Hood ahead to scout for them and learn who held the castle presently. "Twenty men walking the walls, maybe more," he reported on his return. "Lots of carts and wagons. Heavy laden going in, empty going out. Guards at every gate."

"Banners?" asked Arianne.

"Gold. On the gatehouse and the keep."

"What device did they bear?"

"None that I could see, but there was no wind. The banners hung limp from their staffs."

That was vexing. The Golden Company's banners were cloth-of-gold, devoid of arms and ornament… but the banners of House Baratheon were also gold, though theirs displayed the crowned stag of Storm's End. Limp golden banners could be either. "Were there others banners? Silver-grey?"

"All the ones that I saw were gold, princess."

She nodded. Mistwood was the seat of House Mertyns, whose

arms showed a great horned owl, white on grey. If their banners were not flying, likely the talk was true, and the castle had fallen into the hands of Jon Connington and his sellswords. “We must take the risk,” she told her party. Her father’s caution had served Dorne well, she had come to accept that, but this was a time for her uncle’s boldness. “On to the castle.”

“Shall we unfurl your banner?” asked Joss Hood.

“Not as yet,” said Arianne. In most places, it served her well to play the princess, but there were some where it did not.

Half a mile from the castle gates, three men in studded leather jerkins and steel halfhelms stepped out of the trees to block their path. Two of them carried crossbows, wound and notched. The third was armed only with a nasty grin. “And where are you lot bound, my pretties?” he asked.

“To Mistfall, to see your master,” answered Daemon Sand.

“Good answer,” said the grinner. “Come with us.”

Mistfall’s new sellsword masters called themselves Young John Mudd and Chain. Both knights, to hear them tell it. Neither behaved like any knight that Arianne had ever met. Mudd wore brown from head to heel, the same shade as his skin, but a pair of golden coins dangled from his ears. The Mudds had been kings up by the Trident a thousand years ago, she knew, but there was nothing royal about this one. Nor was he particularly young, but it seemed his father had also served in the Golden Company, where he had been known as Old John Mudd.

Chain was half again Mudd’s height, his broad chest crossed by a pair of rusted chains that ran from waist to shoulder. Where Mudd wore sword and dagger, Chain bore no weapon but five feet of iron links, twice as thick and heavy as the ones that crossed his chest. He wielded them like a whip.

They were hard men, brusque and brutal and not well spoken, with scars and weathered faces that spoke of long service in the free companies. “Serjeants,” Ser Daemon whispered when he saw them. “I have known their sort before.”

Once Arianne had made her name and purpose known to them, the two serjeants proved hospitable enough. “You’ll stay the night,” said Mudd. “There’s beds for all of you. In the morning you’ll have fresh horses, and whatever provisions you might need. M’lady’s maester can send a bird to Griffin’s Roost to let them know you’re coming.”

“And who would them be?” asked Arianne. “Lord Connington?”

The sellswords exchanged a look. “The Halfmaester,” said John Mudd. “It’s him you’ll find at the Roost.”

“Griffin’s marching,” said Chain.

"Marching where?" Ser Daemon ask.

"Not for us to say," said Mudd. "Chain, hold your tongue."

Chain gave a snort. "She's Dorne. Why shouldn't she know? Come down to join us, ain't she?"

That has yet to be determined, thought Arianne Martell, but she felt it best not to press the matter.

At evenfall a fine supper was served to them in the solar, high in the Tower of Owls, where they were joined by the dowager Lady Mertyns and her maester. Though a captive in her own castle, the old woman seemed spry and cheerful. "My sons and grandsons went off when Lord Renly called his banners," she told the princess and her party. "I have not seen them since, though from time to time they send a raven. One of my grandsons took a wound at the Blackwater, but he's since recovered. I expect they will return here soon enough to hang this lot of thieves. " She waved a duck leg at Mudd and Chain across the table.

"We are no thieves," said Mudd. "We're foragers."

"Did you buy all that food down in the yard?"

"We foraged it," said Mudd. "The smallfolk can grow more. We serve your rightful king, old crone." He seemed to be enjoying this. "You should learn to speak more courteous to knights."

"If you two are knights, I'm still a maiden," said Lady Mertyns. "And I'll speak as I please. What will you do, kill me? I have lived too long already."

Princess Arianne said, "Have you been treated well, my lady?"

"I have not been raped, if that is what you're asking," the old woman said. "Some of the serving girls have been less fortunate. Married or unmarried, the men make no distinctions. "

"No one's been doing any raping," insisted Young John Mudd. "Connington won't have that. We follow orders."

Chain nodded. "Some girls was *persuaded*, might be."

"The same way our smallfolk were persuaded to give you all their crops. Melons or maidenheads, it's all the same to your sort. If you want it, you take it." Lady Mertyns turned to Arianne. "If you should see this Lord Connington, you tell him that I knew his mother, and she would be ashamed."

Perhaps I shall, the princess thought.

That night she dispatched her second raven to her father.

Arianne was on her way back to her own chamber when she heard muffled laughter from the adjoining room. She paused and listened for a moment, then pushed the door open to find Elia Sand curled up in a window seat, kissing Feathers. When Feathers saw the princess standing there, he jumped to his feet and began to stammer. Both of them still had their clothes on. Arianne took some small

comfort in that as she sent Feathers on his way with a sharp look and a *"Go"*. Then she turned to Elia. "He is twice your age. A serving man. He cleans up birdshit for the maester. Elia, what were you thinking?"

"We were only kissing. I'm not going to marry him." Elia crossed her arms defiantly beneath her breasts. "You think I never kissed a boy before?"

"Feathers is a man. *A serving man, but still a man.* It did not escape the princess that Elia was the same age she had been when she gave her maidenhead to Daemon Sand. "I am not your mother. Kiss all the boys you want when we return to Dorne. Here and now, though. this is no place for kisses, Elia. Meek and mild and obedient, you said. Must I add *chaste* to that as well? You swore *upon your father's bones.*

"I remember," said Elia, sounding chastened. "Meek and mild and obedient. I won't kiss him again."

The shortest way from Mistwood to Griffin's Roost was through the green, wet heart of the rainwood, slow going at the best of times. It took Arianne and her company the better part of eight days. They travelled to the music of steady, lashing rains beating at the treetops up above, though underneath the green great canopy of leaves and branches she and her riders stayed surprisingly dry. Chain accompanied them for the first four days of their journey north, with a line of wagons and ten men of his own. Away from Mudd he proved more forthcoming, and Arianne was able to charm his life story out of him. His proudest boast was of a great grandsire who had fought with the Black Dragon on the Redgrass Field, and crossed the narrow sea with Bittersteel. Chain himself had been born into the company, fathered on a camp follower by his sellsword father. Though he had been raised to speak the Common Tongue and think of himself as Westerosi, he had never set foot in any part of the Seven Kingdoms till now.

A sad tale, and a familiar one, Arianne thought. His life was all of a piece, a long list of places where he'd fought, foes he'd faced and slain, wounds he'd taken. The princess let him talk, from time to time prompting him with a laugh, a touch, or a question, pretending to be fascinated. She learned more than she would ever need to know about Mudd's skill with dice, Two Swords and his fondness for red-haired women, the time someone made off with Harry Strickland's favorite elephant, Little Pussy and his lucky cat, and the other feats and foibles of the men and officers of the Golden Company. But on the fourth day, in an unguarded moment, Chain let slip a " … once we have Storm's End.

"The princess let that aside go without comment, though it gave her considerable pause.*Storm's End. This griffin is a bold one, it would seem. Or else a fool.* The seat of House Baratheon for three centuries, of

the ancient Storm Kings for thousands of years before that, Storm's End was said by some to be impregnable. Arianne had heard men argue about which was the strongest castle in the realm. Some said Casterly Rock, some the Eyrie of the Arryns, some Winterfell in the frozen north, but Storm's End was always mentioned too. Legend said it was raised by Brandon the Builder to withstand the fury of a vengeful god. Its curtain walls were the highest and strongest in all the Seven Kingdoms, forty to eighty feet in thickness. Its mighty windowless drum tower stood less than half as tall as the Hightower of Oldtown, but rose straight up in place of being stepped, with walls thrice as thick as those to be found in Oldtown. No siege tower was tall enough to reach Storm's End battlements; neither mangonel nor trebuchet could hope to breech its massive walls. *Does Connington think to mount a siege?* She wondered. *How many men can he have?* Long before the castle fell, the Lannisters would dispatch an army to break any such siege. *That way is hopeless too.*

That night when she told Ser Daemon what Chain had said, the Bastard of Godsgrace seemed as perplexed as she was. "Storm's End was still held by men loyal to Lord Stannis when last I heard. You would think Connington might do better to make common cause with another rebel, rather than making war upon him too."

"Stannis is too far away to be of help to him," Arianne mused. "Capturing a few minor castles whilst their lords and garrisons are off at distant wars, that's one thing, but if Lord Connington and his pet dragon can somehow take one of the great strongholds of the realm … "

"…the realm would have to take them seriously," Ser Daemon finished. "And some of those who do not love the Lannisters might well come flocking to their banners."

That night Arianne penned another short note to her father and had Feathers send it on its way with her third raven.

Young John Mudd has been sending out birds as well, it seemed. Near dusk on the fourth day, not long after Chain and his wagons had taken their leave of them, Arianne's company was met by a column of sellswords down from Griffin's Roost, led by the most exotic creature that the princess had ever laid her eyes on, with painted fingernails and gemstones sparkling in his ears.

Lysono Maar spoke the Common Tongue very well. "I have the honor to be the eyes and ears of the Golden Company, princess."

"You look… " She hesitated.

"…like a woman?" He laughed. "That I am not."

" …like a Targaryen," Arianne insisted. His eyes were a pale lilac, his hair a waterfall of white and gold. All the same, something about him made her skin crawl. *Was this what Viserys looked like?* she found

herself wondering. *If so perhaps it is a good thing he is dead.*

"I am flattered. The women of House Targaryen are said to be without peer in all the world."

"And the men of House Targaryen?"

"Oh, even prettier. Though if truth be told, I have only seen the one." Maar took her hand in his own, and kissed her lightly on the wrist. "Mistwood sent word of your coming, sweet princess. We will be honored to escort you to the Roost, but I fear you have missed Lord Connington and our young prince."

"Off at war?" *Off to Storm's End?*

"Just so."

The Lyseni was a very different sort of man than Chain. *This one will let nothing slip*, she realized, after a scant few hours in his company. Maar was glib enough, but he had perfected the art of talking a great deal whilst saying nothing. As for the riders who had come with him, they might as well have been mutes for all that her own men were able to get out of them.

Arianne decided to confront him openly. On the evening of their fifth day out of Mistwood, as they made camp beside the tumbled ruins of an old tower overgrown by vines and moss, she settled down beside him and said, "Is it true that you have elephants with you?"

"A few," said Lysono Maar, with a smile and a shrug.

"And dragons? How many dragons do you have?"

"One."

"By which you mean the boy."

"Prince Aegon is a man grown, princess."

"Can he fly? Breathe fire?"

The Lyseni laughed, but his lilac eyes stayed cold.

"Do you play *cyvasse*, my lord?" asked Arianne. "My father has been teaching me. I am not very skilled, I must confess, but I do know that the dragon is stronger than the elephant."

"The Golden Company was founded by a dragon."

"Bittersteel was half-dragon, and all bastard. I am no maester, but I know some history. You are still sellswords."

"If it please you, princess," he said, all silken courtesy. "We prefer to call ourselves a free brotherhood of exiles."

"As you will. As free brothers go, your company stands well above the rest, I grant you. Yet the Golden Company has been defeated every time it has crossed into Westeros. They lost when Bittersteel commanded them, they failed the Blackfyre Pretenders, they faltered when Maelys the Monstrous led them.

That seemed to amuse him. "We are at least persistent, you must admit. And some of those defeats were near things."

"Some were not. And those who die near things are no less dead

than those who die in routs. Prince Doran my father is a wise man, and fights only wars that he can win. If the tide of war turns against your dragon, the Golden Company will no doubt flee back across the narrow sea, as it has done before. As Lord Connington himself did, after Robert defeated him at the Battle of the Bells. Dorne has no such refuge. Why should we lend our swords and spears to your uncertain cause?"

"Prince Aegon is of your own blood, princess. Son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and Elia of Dorne, your father's sister."

"Daenerys Targaryen is of our blood as well. Daughter of King Aerys, Rhaegar's sister. And she has dragons, or so the tales would have us believe." *Fire and blood.* "Where is she?"

"Half a world away on Slaver's Bay," said Lysono Maar. "As for these purported dragons, I have not seen them. In *cyvasse*, it is true, the dragon is mightier than the elephant. On the battlefield, give me elephants I can see and touch and send against my foes, not dragons made of words and wishes."

The princess lapsed into a thoughtful silence. And that night she dispatched her fourth raven to her father.

And finally Griffin's Roost emerged from the sea mists, on a grey wet day as the rain fell thin and cold. Lysono Maar raised a hand, a trumpet blast echoed off the crags, and the castle's gates yawned open before them. The rain-soaked flag that hung above the gatehouse was white and red, the princess saw, the colors of House Connington, but the golden banners of the company were in evidence as well. They rode in double column across the ridge known as the griffin's throat, with the waters of Shipbreaker Bay growling off the rocks to either side.

Within the castle proper, a dozen of the officers of the Golden Company had assembled to welcome the Dornish princess. One by one they took a knee before her and pressed their lips against the back of her hand, as Lysono Maar offered introductions. Most of the names fled her head almost as soon as she had heard them.

Chief amongst them was an older man with a lean, lined, clean-shaved face, who wore his long hair pulled back into a knot. *This one is no fighter*, Arianne sensed. The Lyseni confirmed her judgment when he introduced the man as Haldon Halfmaester.

"We have rooms prepared for you and yours, princess," this Halden said, when the introductions finally ran their course. "I trust that they will suit. I know you seek Lord Connington, and he desires words with you as well, most urgently. If it please you, on the morrow there will be a ship to take you to him."

"Where?" demanded Arianne.

"Has no one told you?" Halden Halfmaester favored her with a

smile thin and hard as a dagger cut. “Storm’s End is ours. The Hand awaits you there.”

Daemon Sand stepped up beside her. “Shipbreaker Bay can be perilous even on a fair summer’s day. The safer way to Storm’s End is overland.”

“These rains have turned the roads to mud. The journey would take two days, perhaps three,” said Halden Halfmaester. A ship will have the princess there in half a day or less. There is an army descending on Storm’s End from King’s Landing. You will want to be safe inside the walls before the battle.”

Will we? Wondered Arianne. “Battle? Or siege?” She did not intend to let herself be trapped inside Storm’s End.

“Battle,” Halden said firmly. “Prince Aegon means to smash his enemies in the field.”

Arianne exchanged a look with Daemon Sand. “Will you be so good as to show us to our rooms? I would like to refresh myself, and change into dry clothes.”

Halden bowed. “At once.”

Her company had been housed in the east tower, where the lancet windows overlooked Shipbreaker Bay. “Your brother is not at Storm’s End, we know that now,” Ser Daemon said, as soon as they were behind closed doors. “If Daenerys Targaryen has dragons, they are half a world away, and of no use to Dorne. There is nothing for us at Storm’s End, princess. If Prince Doran meant to send you into the middle of a battle, he would have given you three hundred knights, not three.”

Do not be so certain of that, ser. He sent my brother off to Slaver’s Bay with five knights and a maester. “I need to speak with Connington.” Arianne undid the interlocked sun and spear that clasped her cloak, and let the rain-soaked garment slip from her shoulders to puddle on the floor. “And I want to see this dragon prince of his. If he is truly Elia’s son…”

“Whoever’s son he is, if Connington challenges Mace Tyrell in open battle he may soon be a captive, or a corpse.”

“Tyrell is not a man to fear. My uncle Oberyn— “

” —is dead, princess. And ten thousand men is equal to the whole strength of the Golden Company.”

“Lord Connington knows his own strength, surely. If he means to risk battle, he must believe that he can win it.”

“And how many men have died in battles they believed that they could win?” Ser Daemon asked her. “Refuse them, princess. I mistrust these sellswords. Do not go to Storm’s End.”

What makes to believe they will allow me that choice? She had had the uneasy feeling that Haldon Halfmaester and Lysono Maar were

going to put her on that ship come morning whether she willed it or no. *Better not to test them.* "Ser Daemon, you squired for my uncle Oberyn," she said. "If you were with him now, would you be counseling him to refuse as well?" She did not wait for him to respond. "I know the answer. And if you are about to remind me that I am no Red Viper, I know that too. But Prince Oberyn is dead, Prince Doran is old and ill, and I am the heir to Dorne."

"And that is why you should not put yourself at risk." Daemon Sand went to one knee. "Send me to Storm's End in your stead. Then if the griffin's plans should go awry and Mace Tyrell takes the castle back, I will be just another landless knight who swore his sword to this pretender in hopes of gain and glory."

Whereas if I am taken, the Iron Throne will take that for proof that Dorne conspired with these sellswords, and lent aid to their invasion. "It is brave for you to seek to shield me, ser. I thank you for that." She took his hands and drew him back to his feet. "But my father entrusted this task to me, not you. Come the morrow, I sail to beard the dragon in its den."

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